

# The character of Achilles

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Has Achilles' character developed by the end of the *Iliad*? At first sight, his compassion towards Priam in book 24 seems strikingly new, but if we look at the poem in detail we can see continuity as well as contrast.

The ending of the *Iliad* is usually read as a testament to the power of compassion. Not only does Achilles put aside his wrath in order to give Hector's body back to the Trojans, he is even able to reach an understanding of shared humanity with his enemy's father, Priam, such that the two men can weep together and eat together. The ending of the poem is undoubtedly moving, and Achilles' behaviour contrasts with his previous portrayal as a man without pity and obsessed with vengeance. Yet is it right to conclude from book 24 that Achilles has fundamentally changed or 'grown' as a character?

There are, of course, big differences between the Achilles of book 24 and the Achilles we have seen earlier in the poem. The man who rejected the Greek embassy in book 9 and refused to give up his anger at Agamemnon, he now lays aside his fury with Hector to accept his father's supplication; while he previously refused to eat in his immense grief for Patroclus, he now shares food with Priam and tells him of the importance of eating. Achilles' courtesy towards Priam and his calm reflections on the human condition stand in contrast to the murderous Achilles we have seen on the battlefield, and it is hard to reconcile the man who pities Priam with the man who carved a swathe of destruction through the Trojan army.

## Does a leopard change its spots?

Nevertheless, our picture of Achilles in book 24 should not be too rose-tinted, for the poet takes care to remind us that his tendencies towards rage and violence are still an essential part of his character. We see this side of Achilles in his response to Priam's request to see Hector's body immediately:

*Swift-footed Achilles glared at him from beneath his eyebrows and said: 'Do not provoke me any further, old man. I am minded to give Hector back to you. A messenger came to me from Zeus, my mother who bore me, the daughter of the old man of the sea. I know you in my heart,*

*Priam, and it does not escape me that one of the gods brought you to the swift ships of the Achaeans. For no mortal would dare to come to our camp, not even a young and strong man; he could not get past the guard, or easily unlock the bolt to our gate. So do not stir up my spirit in its grief any more, old man, in case I do not allow you in my hut, even though you are a suppliant, and sin against Zeus' commands.*

Achilles turns quickly from consoling Priam to threatening him with violence. In his speech he acknowledges that hurting a suppliant is a serious crime and would incur divine anger – a reminder to the audience of how shocking this threat is. While peaceful relations between the two enemies may be a delicate issue, Achilles is obliged to protect Priam, as he has accepted the old man's supplication and knows that Zeus has ordered him to give back the body. So despite Achilles' new compassionate attitude, his quick temper remains, and we are reminded that he still has the capacity to react disproportionately to any perceived offence.

We see this once again when Achilles oversees the preparation of Hector's body:

*He called to the servants and ordered them to bathe and anoint the body, but to take it away first, in case Priam should see his son, and in his heart's grief not restrain his anger upon looking at his child, and Achilles' own heart be stirred up to anger and he might kill Priam and sin against Zeus' commands.*

Again the threat of violence lurks beneath the surface, and we are once more reminded that this violence would be a crime against the gods. Yet while Achilles may still be prone to anger and liable to perform terrible acts if he is provoked, he now seems to have a better understanding of the situations that are likely to arouse his anger. Thus the repeated hints of aggression demonstrate that Achilles is essentially the same man, yet his response to these moments suggests a greater

degree of self-control.

Achilles' violence and anger, then, are not absent from the end of the poem – they still lie beneath his compassionate and controlled exterior. It is equally simplistic to see the positive qualities Achilles demonstrates in book 24 as new character developments, for most of them reflect aspects of his character we have seen earlier in the poem. Thus his hospitality to Priam has been foreshadowed by his courteous treatment of Agamemnon's heralds in book 1. The heralds have been sent to remove Briseis from Achilles' hut, and approach him with fear, yet Achilles treats them politely, explaining that 'it is not you who are to blame, but Agamemnon' (335). Similarly, we are told that Achilles has treated Trojan captives compassionately in the past, and Andromache recalls him showing respect to her dead father by honouring him with a burial (6.416–20).

## Learning life's lessons

Yet on reading the poem it is hard not to see Achilles' attitude in 24 as representing a different aspect of his character. And when we analyse the poem, we see that Homer presents Achilles as possessing the same attributes as before, but expressing them differently. An example is his speech to Priam where he urges him to eat by using the example of Niobe (601–20). Whereas Priam has lost one son, Niobe lost twelve children, but after a period of mourning even she finally accepted the need to eat. So too Priam and Achilles must accept their own losses and must think of eating: an act which symbolizes the resumption of ordinary human activities. This lesson ties in with the earlier story of the two jars of Zeus (527–33): since all humans must expect suffering in their lives, they must learn to accept their suffering and continue living their lives. This insight into the human condition is often seen as a new moral development within the poem, yet its underlying philosophy is strikingly similar to the bleak moral Achilles gives to the Trojan Lycaon in book 21 when he rejects Lycaon's pleas for Achilles to spare his life:

*'You die too, friend; why lament so much? Patroclus died, and he was a far better man than you. Do you not see how fine and great a man I*

*am? I am the son of a noble father,  
and a goddess was my mother. Yet  
death and powerful fate await me  
too: there will be a morning or  
evening or afternoon where some  
man in the battle will take away my  
life with a throw of his spear or an  
arrow from his string.'*

While Achilles' philosophical outlook here appears to be the opposite of his attitude in 24, both morals are built on the same foundation: namely, Achilles' realisation that death and grief are inescapable in human life. Yet from this same understanding, Achilles reaches two very different conclusions. In book 21, he uses the certainty of death to justify further killing: if suffering is inevitable, what is the point of living, and why should Lycaon seek to delay a death which will come sooner or later regardless of Achilles' actions? But in book 24, he uses the same starting premise to arrive at a new conclusion. Since death and suffering are inevitable, humans must accept them as their fate, and get on with living the rest of their lives. In 21 Achilles sees the inevitability of death as rendering life pointless; in 24 he argues that the only way of responding to the presence of death is by affirming the life that remains to us.

The end of the poem, then, does not represent a fundamental change in the way Achilles is presented. Rather, the poet shows us the continuities in Achilles' characterisation. Achilles is portrayed as recognisably the same person, and he still possesses the quick temper which was the source of so much trouble, and he still runs the risk of reacting disproportionately when he feels offended. Similarly, Achilles' positive qualities do not spring from nowhere: Homer has taken care to foreshadow his generosity of spirit and his sense of piety and hospitality earlier in the poem. What we do see in 24, however, is a shift in emphasis in the way Achilles is portrayed: his anger and touchiness are more controlled, and his compassion more pronounced. Achilles' use of the parables of Niobe and the jars of Zeus demonstrates this shift, for we see him draw on his earlier acceptance of death in order to come to a very different conclusion. Thus Homer does not attempt to smooth over the negative aspects of Achilles' personality, just as the understanding reached between Achilles and Priam does not negate the harsh reality of Troy's impending doom.

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